



FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE

Florida Softshell Turtle: Native species

Florida Rules

On August 26, 2021, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) issued executive order #21-19 that states the take or transport of all freshwater softshell turtle species is currently prohibited until the order is repealed.

Appearance



Florida softshell turtles have a leathery soft dark brown to olive green shell that is oblong and has bumps behind the head. Florida softshells have tubular nostrils and webbed feet. Adult females, which average between 24 and 30 centimeters (roughly 9 to 11 inches) in length are larger than males, which are usually between 15 and 19 centimeters (6 to 8 inches).

Female softshells have short tails that barely extend past the shell, while male Florida softshells have longer tails. Young turtles resemble adults but may be lighter in coloration and more rounded in shape. Florida softshell turtles have long necks which they can extend about halfway down their shell. If helping a softshell turtle across a road, be cautious as they can deliver a powerful bite.

There are two other species of softshell turtles in Florida, the smooth softshell (*Apalone mutica*) and the spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera*) which are restricted to the Panhandle.

Behavior

Florida softshell turtles spend most of their time in the water and can be seen basking along the shores of bodies of water or on logs and floating vegetation. Florida softshells are primarily carnivorous, feeding on snails, insects, fish, crustaceans and rarely have even been documented to eat small birds. They can be aggressive when they feel threatened and can also excrete a strong-smelling musk that is a warning to any potential predators. They are active, except for during the winter months when they may hibernate. While the lifespan of wild Florida softshell turtles is unknown, in captivity softshell turtles can live more than 20 years. The nesting season for Florida softshells is from late March to July, the average clutch size is 20 eggs, and can vary from 9-38 eggs per nest. Females can nest 4-6 times per season, and large females may lay over 200 eggs annually. Their eggs are white and spherical, and egg remnants can frequently be found near depredated nests. Males reach sexual maturity when they are about 15 centimeters in size (6 inches), while females reach sexual maturity when they reach 20 centimeters in size (8 inches).

Habitat



The Florida softshell turtle is found all over the state except for the northern parts of Escambia, Santa Rosa, and the northwest tip of Okaloosa.

Florida softshell turtles can be found throughout Florida, southern Georgia, and southeastern South Carolina. They live in ponds, streams, marshes, and sometimes in drainage ditches. They prefer areas with muddy or sandy bottoms. This is because they like to conceal themselves in the sand or mud at the bottom of these bodies of water, especially during the winter months.

Threats

Threats to the Florida softshell include:

Predation: Birds, bears, raccoons and red foxes eat softshell turtle eggs. Large fish, other turtles, and mammals (such as the skunk and armadillo) eat young turtles. Alligators are the primary predators of adults.

Road mortality: Florida softshell turtles will sometimes leave their ponds or streams to look for nesting areas or better habitat. This leads to crossing roads and highways where they can be struck by cars.

Habitat loss and degradation: Habitats and nesting areas of Florida softshell turtles have been lost to development and agriculture. Runoff and pollution can degrade water quality. Fishing lures often attract the attention of softshell turtles, and turtles may ingest hooks which may cause health problems.

Disease: [turtle frasiervirus 1](#) has impacted the Florida softshell turtle population, although the net effect of this virus is unknown.

Conservation and Management

Commercial harvest and sale of wild Florida softshell turtles is prohibited in Florida.

How You Can Help



Report sick or dead turtles to the [FWC freshwater turtle reporting form](#).

Turtles can be helped across the road if it is safe to do so, but it's important to only move the turtle in the direction it was heading and release it once it is safe. Turtles should not be translocated, even if it appears there isn't appropriate habitat for it nearby. To avoid spreading turtle frasiervirus 1, do not capture and transport Florida softshell turtles, even those that healthy, to release turtles at new locations.